

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park

The confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers

Harpers Ferry

The town of Harpers Ferry is best known as the scene of the 1859 John Brown raid, an event of great importance leading up to the Civil War. The raid focused the attention of the country on Harpers Ferry. John Brown, an ardent abolitionist and leader in the bloody sectional strife in Kansas, conceived a plan to liberate the slaves by starting a revolution, arming the slaves, and establishing a free black stronghold in the Appalachians. He chose Harpers Ferry because of the stock of weapons at the federal armory there and its location near the mountains.

During the summer of 1859 Brown gathered weapons, supplies, and supporters at the Kennedy Farm, located five miles away in Maryland. On the night of October 16, he set out for Harpers Ferry with 17 men and a wagonload of supplies. The party seized the Potomac bridge watchman and took the armory watchmen into town. Brown cut the telegraph wires and sent out parties to bring in slaves and hostages. An engineer on an eastbound train, however, telegraphed an alarm upon arriving in Monocacy, Maryland, in the early morning.

Brown's men barricaded themselves in armory buildings and began to exchange fire with townspeople. By noon the militia had arrived and secured the Potomac River bridge. The raiders who survived the encounter with the militia managed to take refuge in the fire engine house of the armory's musket factory, where they were stormed by a party of marines on the morning of October 18. Two men were bayoneted and the others captured. John Brown was brought to trial in Charles Town the next week, found guilty of treason, and hanged on December 2, 1859 (see also Jefferson County Courthouse; John Brown Cabin, Miami County, Kansas; John Brown's Headquarters, Washington County, Maryland; John Brown Farm, Essex County, New York; and John Brown House, Franklin County, Pennsylvania).

Harpers Ferry is also significant black history as the location of Storer College. Storer College was established the vacated U.S. armory residences in the area known as Camp Hill after the Civil War. The school's support came from northern philanthropists and the Freedmen's Bureau. Begun as an elementary school in 1865, the institution soon became a college focusing on teacher training and expanded to include theology, industrial arts, and home arts. During the college's first 40 years, the student body averaged 176 men and women. The school closed in 1955, but its buildings remain as reminders of one of the earliest institutions established for black education after the Civil War. [A 10/15/66 NPS, 66000041]